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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether gender-based differences in psychological adjustment, coping, racial identity, and grade point average (GPA) existed among 100 at-risk, urban, African American high school students. Students completed the Affects Balance Scale, Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences, and Black Racial Identity Scale. Researchers identified cumulative GPA through school records. Results indicated that female students had significantly higher cumulative GPAs; reported the use of social support as a means of coping to a significantly higher degree; reported the use of avoidance as a means of coping to a significantly higher degree; reported racial attitudes associated with black racial identity stage III (immersion/emersion) to a significantly higher degree; and reported the experience of negative affect to a significantly lower degree than did urban male African American high school students. (Contains 24 references.) (SM)

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Gender in the predominantly Black Urban High School:
A study of psychological adjustment, coping, racial identity, and GPA

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UD 035 357

Gender in the predominantly Black Urban High School:

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Abstract

Counseling Psychologists involved in urban school educational reform often have limited awareness of the setting's gender-based issues. In a study of 100 Black urban high school students, this poster session addresses the research question: Do gender-based differences in psychological adjustment, coping, racial identity, and GPA exist in this population? Female urban African American high school students in an urban setting were found to: a) have significantly higher cumulative grade point averages; b) report the use of social support as a means of coping to a significantly higher degree; c) report the use of Avoidance as a means of coping to a significantly higher; report racial attitudes associated with Black Racial Identity Stage 3, Immersion/Emersion to a significantly greater degree; and, report the experience of negative affect (anxiety, depression, guilt, and hostility) to a significantly lower degree than urban male African American high school students. Implications for training, educational reform, and service delivery are discussed.

Gender in the predominantly Black Urban High School:

A study of psychological adjustment, coping, racial identity, and GPA

Rationale

First, although Census reports indicate that African American men have higher incomes than female peers, the direction of this sex-based comparison is quite different preceding adulthood. The literature and mainstream media consistently note African American boys'/adolescents' higher levels of attrition, alienation, and engagement in at-risk behaviors within schools and lower enrollment in institutions of higher education when compared to African American girls. Though a plethora of program development activity exists to attend to social ills within urban African American communities, gender-sensitive programming is rare. In addition, few empirical studies examine the points of similarity and difference between boys and girls to guide the development of such programs. Consequently, such research is certainly warranted if we are to develop the most effective services to increase academic persistence and positive adjustment within urban communities noted for higher rates of unemployment, crime, and poverty.

Second, leaders within APA Division 17 highlight the importance of attending to gender and race/ethnicity simultaneously to increase understanding of the unique issues related to prospective recipients of counseling services and training. However, most researchers addressing these differences target only university populations. Given the significantly lower enrollment and higher attrition of African Americans, particularly men, generalizability of the results of such research may be limited and a clear understanding of gender-issues within communities remains elusive. In addition, some assume that African American men and women have the same issues as middle-class White men and women, which may not be the case. Research that addresses gender within African American communities may better inform practitioners, educators, and researchers of the definition of 'gender issues' within these communities. Research using populations within urban, racially monolithic communities of African Americans would certainly

expand the understanding of the points of similarity and points of contention that exist within these communities.

The purpose of this study is to identify gender-based similarities and differences in urban Black students' psychological adjustment, coping styles, racial identity, and academic performance. These variables were selected because of the association found in the literature between each of them and academic/life success; and, because each of the variables lend themselves to intervention using counseling strategies associated with the multicultural counseling literature and academic support. Recommendations for future research and implications for service delivery, training, and educational reform will be provided.

Method

Parental consent was received for 49 female and 51 male Black urban high school freshmen in a high-risk district for poverty, unemployment, and crime. Freshmen were selected given a 50-60% attrition rate over a 4-year period found at this level and the researchers' effort to understand students' gender-based experiences at this critical stage of development. Participants completed: the Affects Balance Scale (Derogatis, 1975), a measure of psychological adjustment; the Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences (Patterson & McCubbin, 1983), a measure of coping styles; and, the Black Racial Identity Attitudes Scale (Helms, 1990). Cumulative GPAs were identified through school records at the time of data collection and participants noted sex on coversheet.

Measures

Affects Balance Scale. The Affects Balance Scale (ABS; Derogatis, 1975) is a self-report adjective mood scale with a construct base rooted in the idea that healthy psychological adjustment or well-being is represented by the manifestation of positive affects or emotions as well as the relative absence of negative emotions. Mood and affect states are reflected in the ABS by four positive affect dimensions (Joy, Contentment,

Vigor, and Affection) and four negative affect dimensions (Anxiety, Depression, Guilt, and Hostility). The overall score on the test, the Affect Balance Index (ABI), reflects the balance between positive and negative affects expressed in standardized scores. The larger the ABI, the more the positive psychological adaptation is represented. The ABS is composed of 40 items and requires only 3 to 5 minutes for completion.

Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences. The Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences (A-COPE; Patterson & McCubbin, 1983) is a coping inventory designed to identify the behaviors adolescents find helpful in managing problems or difficult situations. The normal developmental tasks of adolescents center on the search for identity, both as part of a group and as individuals, with attention focused on physical, social, and psychological aspects of self. The need to develop enough independence from one's family, to discover one's separateness and uniqueness, frequently creates an atmosphere of conflict in the family. The 95 items were grouped conceptually into the following patterns for coping: a) ventilating feelings (expression of frustrations and tensions such as yelling, blaming others, saying mean things, and complaining to friends or family), b) seeking diversions (efforts to keep busy and engage in relative sedate activities, such as sleeping, watching TV, or reading, as a way to escape from or forget about the sources of tension and stress), c) developing self-reliance and optimism (directing efforts to be more organized and in charge of the situation as well as to think positively about what is happening to him or her), d) developing social support (efforts to stay emotionally connected with other people through reciprocal problem solving and expression of affect), e) solving family problems (use of communication with family members and following family rules to minimize conflict), f) avoiding problems

(use of substances as a way to escape), g) seeking spiritual support (religious behaviors), h) investing in close friends (seeking closeness and understanding from peers), i) seeking professional support (getting help and advice from a professional counselor or teacher about difficult problems), j) engaging in demanding activity (engaging in challenging activities that allow achievement toward a goal such as strenuous physical activity, improving oneself, or working hard on schoolwork), k) being humorous (not taking the situation too seriously by joking or making light of a situation), and l) relaxing (to reduce tension by engaging in activities such as daydreaming, listening to music, or riding around in a car.). Each coping strategy is represented in a subscale with an individual score. The instrument is based on the premise that adolescents will use more than one style of coping with day-to-day problems. Completion time is approximately 10 minutes.

Black Racial Identity Attitudes Scale. The RIAS-B (Helms, 1990; Helms & Parham, 1985; Parham & Helms, 1981) was developed based on Cross's (1978) assumption that African American individuals, as they move from a position of degrading their racial identity to one that leads them to feeling secure with their racial identity, progress through four identifiable stages: Pre-encounter, Encounter, Immersion, and Internalization. The RIAS-B assesses African American persons' attitudes about themselves. The short form of the RIAS-B consists of 30 attitude statements with a corresponding 5-point Likert-type response format (strongly agree to strongly disagree). The RIAS-B is scored by averaging ratings for the appropriate keyed items assigned to each of four subscales. Averaged subscale scores range from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of the attitudes represented by each subscale. The original version was derived from the responses of 54 college students attending a

predominantly White Midwestern university. Additional normative samples were drawn from both predominantly White and historically Black universities (Pyrant & Yanico, 1991). Internal consistency reliability estimates for the RIAS-B are reported for each stage of racial identity: Pre-encounter .69, Encounter .50, Immersion .67, and Internalization .79. Cronbach's alpha was used again to compute respective reliability coefficients: Pre-encounter, .76; Encounter, .51; Immersion, .69; and, Internalization, .80 (Helms & Parham, 1985).

Racial Identity according to (Helms, 1990; Richardson & Helms, 1994), refers to "a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group." (p. 172). Central to much of the theory and research on African American racial identity are Helm's five racial identity ego statuses. These statuses addresses the development of African American racial identity and the respective attitudes associated with each African American racial identity stage. The Conformity (Pre-Encounter) Status is depicted by devaluation of own group and loyalty to White-European standards. The Dissonance (Encounter) Status is depicted by racial confusion concerning one's own group. The Immersion/Emersion Status is depicted by complete praise of one's socio-racial group and attack/rejection of White-European values and institutions. The Internalization Status is depicted by praise of one's own group/cultural attributes, and the ability to interact objectively with members of the White-European groups. The Integrative Awareness Status is depicted by the ability to value one's own cultural identity and be able to relate with members of other oppressed groups (Helms, 1995).

Procedure

Classrooms were randomly sampled by the hour and the teachers of the core freshmen course work. Parental consent was provided for 175 students; however due to absences, incomplete packets, and students' unwillingness to participate, only 100 completed packets were returned. In exchange for teacher participation, after the packets were collected, researchers engaged classes in mini-workshops addressing the development of problem-solving skills and coping styles.

Data Analysis

T-tests were used to assess whether the means of male and female students across variables are *statistically* different from each other ($p < .05$).

Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations by sex of all variables included in the study. The means found in a prior study using an urban freshmen population in an earlier study are presented (Steward, Jo, Murray, Fitzgerald, Neil, Fear, & Hill, 1998) as well as the results of t-tests comparing the means of males and females in the present study. Female urban African American high school students in an urban setting were found to: a) have significantly higher cumulative grade point averages ($t = 3.30$; $p < .05$); b) report the use of social support as a means of coping to a significantly higher degree ($t = 2.53$; $p < .05$); c) report the use of Avoidance as a means of coping to a significantly higher degree ($t = 2.38$; $p < .05$); report racial attitudes associated with Black Racial Identity Stage 3, Immersion/Emersion to a significantly greater degree ($t = 2.38$; $p < .05$); and, report the experience of negative affect (anxiety, depression, guilt, and hostility) to a significantly lower degree than urban male African American high school students ($t = 2.74$; $p < .05$). No other significant gender differences were found on the others subscales in this study.

Discussion

Significant gender differences were found within the urban school community school. The following section integrates the findings in this study with prior empirical research.

Gender and Academic Performance

The finding of African American girls' general academic performance exceeding that of boys supports that in prior empirical studies of gender in other populations, such as both rural and urban schools in New Foundland, Canada (Bulcock, Whitt, & Beebe, 1991) and 4th, 7th, and 10th grade students in Saskatchewan (Randhawa, 1991). Bulcock, Whitt, & Beebe (1991) offered two possible explanations for significant gender differences in grade point averages found in rural and urban districts. First, these researchers attributed the outcome to the prevailing socio-economic status within the communities wherein data was collected. They concluded that "when relative incomes are low, male incentive to invest in intellectual competencies are low, while, in contrast, when relative incomes are low within a community, female incentives and opportunities are high." This hypothesis could offer some insight into the results of the current study given what the higher prevalence of poverty and crime currently existing in the community. These differences may have little to do with culture or race, but to gender socialization related to access to limited resources existing in an at-risk for failure community. The second explanation offered by these researchers is that female students may experience the urban school setting differently than male students. They found that girls tended to be more satisfied with the school setting than boys in these communities. This latter hypothesis is supported by the findings of Wright and Houck's (1995) study of Appalachian rural high school students. Results from this study indicated that teachers' expectations of students and estimations of their competence varies based on gender. Consequently, teachers in these setting may expect different performance and behavior from boys than from girls and these difference expectations may well influence outcomes. This is particularly the case in the current study given that most of the teachers were

female and White, and the African American adolescent male may elicit a very different response from White female teachers than the adolescent African American female.

We offer a number of other hypotheses for the outcomes that might be the focus of future research examining gender differences in academic performance.

1. Rules for school may more closely reflect the rules for home for girls, but not for boys. The expectations and rules that single parent African American women have of their daughters may be more congruent with the expectations within the school setting than those for African American sons. Therefore, home to school transition may be easier in general for girls than for boys, consequently adjustment smoother, and outcomes more positive.
2. The school peer culture may positively reinforce a connection between high academic performance and gender and race. For example, it may be less taboo for a girl to achieve academically and receive positive attention from teachers, particularly White teachers, than for a male student to do the same. This hypothesis is supported by the anecdotal literature that suggests that many urban African American students connect high academic performance with 'acting White', particularly among male. This may be even more prevalent in settings wherein most of the teachers or White.
3. Given that there were more female teachers in this setting than male teachers, female students may have benefited from exposure to strong positive female role models that the males did not experience to the same degree. In addition, most of the male teachers were also strongly involved in sports, which also may serve as a bias against high academic performance as a point of commitment in isolation from engagement in sports activity. In addition, given that most of the students' homes were headed by single mothers, girls too may have benefited from females in leader roles to a greater degree than the male students. Certainly this would influence teacher/student

interaction, student feelings of connectedness/belongingness in the school community.

Although the findings of this study are supported in prior research, in contrast, there is prior research that do not support the existence of gender differences in academic achievement. Slate, Jones, Sloas, and Blake (1997) reported diminishing gender differences when they examined the Stanford Achievement Test-8scores of 371 students from an economically depressed part of Arkansas. They concluded that whatever gender differences existed were small and not significant. In a study of 749 gifted and talented students who attended a 2-3 week residential summer enrichment program in the South or Midwest to provide academic challenges that they would not have received otherwise, Plucker (1998) found no significant gender differences in academic performance during this period. In addition, it must also be noted that even in the study cited above (Randhawa, 1991), for which partial support were found for the current findings, there was a pattern that suggested that girls tended to lose the advantage of higher academic performance by middle school, whereas at that point boys tended to excel. Such mixed findings in the literature suggest the necessity of future research that will increase our understanding of academic performance in all school, but, particularly in urban African American high schools such as that in study where regardless of gender, the mean grade point average for both female and male high school students is significantly below that which reflects adequate academic competence to effectively make the transition from school to work in today's society (i.e., GPA < 2.0).

Gender and Coping

Female students in this study were found to report significant differences than male students on use of 2 of the 12 coping styles assessed by the A-COPE (i.e., Use of Social Support and Use of Avoiding). Females reported use of social support and use of avoidance as a means of coping with current stressors moreso than male students. Significant gender differences in adolescents' are well-documented in a number of prior empirical research studies throughout the

literature (Chapman & Mullis, 2000; Clark, 1995; Mullis, 2000; Piko, 2001; Plucker, 1998). Chapman & Mullis (2000) found that African American female adolescents in general tend to avoid problems and seek out other activities more so than any other racial group and to deal with stress in a more harmonious way. In addition, both Piko (2001) and Mullis & Chapman (2000), in a study of adolescents that females tended to use social support as a tension reducer and seek out others for emotional support during stressful period; whereas, males tended to show less trust and were very reluctant to seek out help from others as they tried to manage their problems on their own. Clark (1995), in a study of 36,000 students' behaviors using the Minnesota Adolescent Health Survey, found that girls engaged in quietly disturbed behaviors, while boys acted out their troubles, which is consistent with the findings of this current study of girls using avoidance.

The most prevalent explanation for these specific differences is rooted in the different socialization of males and females in this particular community setting and in society in general. African American girls may be socialized moreso than boys to use emotional connections during stressful times as a means of coping and to engage in avoidance or passive behaviors as a means of coping instead of more aggressive behaviors typically associated with being male (i.e., striking out). This same socialization may also have resulted in males tending to under-report the use of social support and avoidance as means of coping which may be perceived by others in this setting as feminine or being "like a girl". In addition, girls expressing the need for emotional connectiveness during stressful periods may elicit a different response from others in the setting if they do the same. For example, a girls movement toward others during a troubles time may be elicit sympathy responses, whereas the same behavior from an adolescent male may lead to him being perceived as a complainer or weak. Though they may 'need' the same response, the same response may not be available, resulting in a 'masking' of the need for emotional ties during stressful periods and a turning inward. This hypothesis is supported by the literature describing the male gender role conflict inherent in many segments of today's society (Good & Wood, 1995; Thompson, Pleck, & Ferrera, 1992).

Though the authors believe these significant differences to be noteworthy, it is important for readers to acknowledge that there were only 2 significant gender differences found out of the 12 styles of coping assessed. Does this pattern reflect a greater similarity in gender socialization in the use of coping strategies in urban, at-risk communities for poverty? Given the stark and significant differences in grade point ages within the same setting, are the use of social support and avoidance as means of coping with stress the keys to a better understanding of urban female adolescents' higher academic performance in such setting? Future research is certainly warranted in this area if we are be able to identify specific effective coping strategies for those living in these setting that will lead to optimal outcomes in terms of school performance.

Gender and the Experience of Negative Affect

The finding indicating that male adolescents who participated in this current study reported a significantly greater degrees of negative affect than females may be directly related to the significant differences discusses in the previous section. Because of the lower engagement in Avoidance and use of Social Support, male adolescents may tackle the source of their source directly with guidance or support leading to greater degrees of negative affect and consequently psychological adjustment than female adolescents. This hypothesis is supported by the findings of Johnston and Page (1991) that indicated that females were generally higher on measures of adjustment and lower on depression. Though this longitudinal study examined individuals across a number of developmental stages, the results were similar to those in this current study. In addition, the existence of gender role conflict discussed above may heighten male adolescents negative affect due to the increased exposure to a setting consisting moreso of females and the absence of male support.

On the other hand, the findings of this study were not supported on this point by most of the prior empirical studies of gender differences. Females tending to report higher levels of both depression and stress and other negative affective states than male peers is well-documented in the literature (Crick & Grotpeter, 1997; Davies & Windle, 1997; Hussong, 2000; Parker, 1996).

Though limited, there also have been a few studies having results that have found no significant gender differences at all (Parker, 1996). Future empirical studies that more specifically identity individual differences by sex that may result in greater levels of negative affect would certainly be warranted if we are to more clearly under the influence of gender in individuals' psychological well-being in well-defined community settings.

Gender and Racial Identity

African American female adolescents in this study were found to report Black Racial Identity Status III racial attitudes to a greater degree than male adolescents. The immersion-emersion status represents a struggle through an interplay of trying out a new Black identity in a superficial and sometimes stereotypic manner, by angrily lasing out at both Black and Whites, and by idealizing Black/African culture. The individual becomes engaged in learning about Black/African culture, in gaining an understanding of its strengths and weakness, and in developing an African perspective informed by a realistic portrayal of cultural roots and the sociopolitical implications of being Black. One possible explanation for this heightened attitude association for females is that this may also be a developmental stage in which female students are not only sensing the socio-political implications of Blackness, but simultaneously with the increased awareness of being an African American female in the mist of a school setting primarily consisting of White female teachers. In addition, these participants may have a heightened awareness of the unique struggles of their mothers as single heads of households which may lead to adopting unique styles and ways of being that may be clearly identifiable as Black and female, the two being conceptually linked. Earlier studies have also found that racial ethnic minority women, in general, tend to report stronger identification with their ethnic group as compared to males (Fine & Bower, 1989; Plummer, 1993). Explanations offered for these gender differences focuses primarily on different socialization by setting that may result in varying levels of self-esteem, parent influence, and social orientation.

Implications for Education and Counseling

Findings indicate that is critical that gender differences should be considered in the assessment and treatment of urban adolescent clients within urban school settings, in terms of academic performance, coping and attitudes about race. The authors suggest that given these findings not only might gender differences be anticipated in some critical areas of issue presentation, but the implications of cross-gender adaptations in urban community high schools be examined as well. Educators and counselors should become more aware of their perceptions and expectations of all students and work to maintain consistency regardless of gender and to align each in such a manner to optimize the probability of positive academic outcomes. In addition, all within the setting must become more sensitive to the existence of styles of being within urban settings that may initially be miss-perceived or misinterpreted as client or student resistance to the establishment of a working alliance (African American male adolescents) or distraction/avoidance (African American female adolescents).

Limitations of the Findings

1. All measures used in this study were self-report and therefore may only reflect what the individuals wished to relay and not what is their actual belief or practice.
2. The results may not be generalizable to all other urban high school populations given the clearly defined community setting and description of the school, this is particularly true given the limited sample size, the collection of data only at one particular school setting, and the focus on only the freshman class.
3. The sampling process for participants was somewhat haphazard in that only attenders at the time of data collection completed packets. Consequently, these results may only reflect gender differences among those who attended during that time period and little may be known about non-attenders who may be more or less diverse.

Future researchers are strongly encouraged to attend to these limitations in efforts to more clearly identify gender differences among urban adolescent high school students.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and t-test results of Cumulative Grade Point Averages, Affects Balance Scale, A-COPE Subscales, and RIAS-B Subscales (*p < .05).

	Prior Study Mean	Male (Mean/sd)	Female (Mean/sd)	t
Grade Point Average	1.58	1.37/.93	1.94/.91	3.30*
ABI Score	1.01	.93/.72	1.00/.92	.44
ABI Positive	45.37	44.08/12.68	44.57/15.09	.32
ABI Negative	25.07	25.56/10.59	24.63/11.13	2.74*
A-COPE				
Professional Support	3.24	2.92/1.13	3.14/1.44	.84
Demanding Activity	13.27	13.55/3.25	12.67/4/11	1.19
Relaxing	13.71	14.10/2.43	13.51/2.49	1.20
Family Support	17.20	17.41/4.61	17.27/4.47	.65
Social Support	17.39	16.00/3.83	18.43/4.10	2.53*
Ventilating Emotions	17.66	17.76/3.25	18.06/3.13	1.78
Avoid Problems	18.13	17.75/3.30	18.67/2.54	2.38*
Diversion	25.72	25.76/5.37	25.47/5.76	.24
Spiritual Support	7.97	7.73/2.45	8.65/2.56	1.84
Self-Reliance	19.76	19.33/4.45	19.49/3.92	.27
Humor	6.45	6.75/2.11	6.49/2.27	.65
Friends	7.34	7.25/1.91	7.37/1.87	.32
RIAS-B Pre-Encounter	XXX	18.61/4.65	18.20/4.82	.33
Encounter	XXX	9.04/2.69	9.94/2.20	1.43
Immersion/Emersion	XXX	20.46/4.38	21.83/4.21	2.54*
Internalization	XXX	33.43/4.99	33.31/4.19	.27

Summary of Results

1. Female African American high school students in an urban setting were found to have significantly higher cumulative grade point averages that male African American high school students.
2. Female African American high school students in an urban setting were found to report the use of social support as a means of coping to a significantly higher degree than male African American high school students. The use of social support includes efforts to stay emotionally connected with other people through reciprocal problem solving and expression of affect.
3. Female African American high school students in an urban setting were found to report the use of Avoidance as a means of coping to a significantly higher degree than male African American high school students. The use of Avoidance includes the use of substance and food as a means to escape problems.
4. Female African American high school students in an urban setting were found to report racial attitudes associated with Stage 3, Immersion/Emersion, Racial Identity, to a significantly greater degree than male African American high school students. This stage is associated with strong sense of identity regarding 'Blackness' and group cultural identity and a sense of "anti-Whiteness". This stage is associated in the literature with an interpersonal presentation interpreted as being angry.
5. Male African American high school students in an urban setting were found to report the experience of negative affect (anxiety, depression, guilt, and hostility) to a significantly higher degree than female African American high school students.

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